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Eventuality in Fiction: Contingency, Complexity and Narrative

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ABSTRACT:

This essay seizes upon the tension between two senses of “eventuality,” as concerning the staple of narrative, events, and as concerning the kind of contingency that remains unassimilated by narrative sense. Contingency is a manifestation of the gap between the systemic complexity of temporal phenomena and the reductive heuristic of narrative as a mode of cognition. Sophisticated forms of narrative, however, may choose to confront this gap rather than merely exhibit it, as part of their continual effort to refine narrative and finesse its limitations. The possibility of doing so arises because of two features inherent in narrative form itself, which are its latent reflexiveness and its dependence upon the implicit. “One of the Missing,” by Ambrose Bierce, serves as the means through which these ideas are elaborated in more concrete terms, exhibiting as it does both a self-conscious concern with contingency and narrative, and an implicit potentiality beyond its imposition of narrative logic.

KEYWORDS: *Eventuality, complexity, contingency, reflexiveness, narrative cognition*

The term “eventuality” captures narrative’s inherent concern with events, but it also connotes two contrasting ideas: the first is a determinate progression towards an outcome of the sort that is comprehended by narrative “logic” (or the elementary sense-making afforded by narrative form); the second is the unforeseeable circumstance of a contingency, a chance occurrence, which eludes narrative logic. Contingency, on this view, marks the gap that opens up between the reductive but efficient sense-making of narrative and the unmanageable systemic complexity of experience. Manifestations of contingency in narrative are symptomatic of the way our cognitive dependence upon a basic narrative logic strongly constrains how we understand complexity; but this limitation of

narrative may itself be foregrounded as a problem. Sophisticated cultural forms of narrative, including literary fiction, work to loosen the constraints of narrative's reductive logic – principally by exploiting two intrinsic features of narrative itself, which are its reflexivity, and the irreducible narrative function of the implicit. Literary fiction reflexively chafes at the limits of narrative sense-making in multiple respects, by subjecting narrative logic to the complex processes of its own articulation within a semiotic system. In doing so it displaces interpretative interest from its sequential logic onto the circulation of meaning within the complex networks of signification that narrative itself cannot help generating. This disposition of literary fiction is inherent in its formal self-consciousness and has, I suggest, two antithetical effects. One is that its reflexive movement continually confronts narrative sense-making with the limit of its power, in the unassimilable form of contingency; the other is that it continually returns to the frontier of incipient sense, in the mind's efforts to comprehend phenomena – the threshold of emergent meaning where narrative cognition supervenes upon embodied experience. Through such a double movement, literary fiction sustains an equilibrium between affirmation and critique of narrative meaning, and indeed there is a dynamic reciprocity between the two. Even the bleakest view, just to the extent that it is successfully articulated, does more than it says; but equally, its value lies in the doing, the process, not in arrival at any final ground in meaning, and no pretension to the latter will withstand scepticism. I pursue this line of inquiry here by adopting Ambrose Bierce's story, "One of the Missing," as its vehicle. Theory, here, does not find its rationale in interpretation of the chosen text, because the ultimate interest lies with the theoretical ideas rather than the reading itself. But neither does the text function as a basis for inductive generalisation: its purpose is not to provide empirical support for the theoretical argument, which must stand on its own merits, but rather to articulate the theoretical ideas in a particular narrative context.¹

Bierce's "One of the Missing" is an American Civil War story that foregrounds improbable contingencies, and attempts to motivate them in significantly contrasting ways.² The story's double representational gesture manifests a tension between systemic and narrative models of causality, and further leads me to distinguish between Bierce's own communicative purposes and the textual dynamics of the story itself. Critical readings of the story often lean heavily upon the assumption of a strongly moralistic intention on Bierce's part, founded upon the role of the satirist that was the core of

his literary persona. But Bierce's satirical stance is so comprehensive in scope that it approaches a universal cynicism, so that the very possibility of a well-founded moral perspective is itself undermined. In these circumstances it can no longer be a premise that the characters and their actions are held accountable to an order of values; instead the very possibility of such an order becomes a problem. Bierce's civil war stories, including "One of the Missing," do in fact thematise perspectival problems of value and fact, not least in response to the destructive chaos of civil war itself, and to the subjective experience of trauma. This thematics is implicated in his recurrent defamiliarisation of his characters' experiences of space and time, as in the story for which he is perhaps best known, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."³ But Bierce's own foregrounded thematic purposes are subsumed by the textual complexities of his story, which ramify beyond plausible attribution to any authorial intention other than a broad gesture of dissatisfaction with the consolations of narrative form. To this extent, his narrative's relation to its own semiotic resources becomes performative, mirroring the insufficiency of narrative sense to the complex causal dynamics of real-world systemic processes, while generating a systemic complexity of its own through the excess of connotation that accompanies every strategy of narrative integration he deploys.

"One of the Missing" is set at Kennesaw Mountain, where Bierce himself, serving in the Union Army, suffered a serious head wound inflicted by a Confederate sharpshooter. The story centres upon a Union scout, Jerome Searing, who undertakes a reconnaissance mission beyond the front line and discovers that the enemy are in retreat. Instead of returning immediately to report this information, he loads his rifle with the intention of firing upon the distant troops. At the same time, a Confederate captain of artillery takes a pot shot at what he believes to be a group of Union officers, misses, and demolishes the farm building that Searing is using for cover. Searing regains consciousness to find himself in an extraordinary situation: he is half-buried and immobilised in the rubble of the collapsed building, while his own hair-triggered rifle has fallen so that it is now pointing directly at his forehead. All his efforts to move or to turn the rifle aside are frustrated, and eventually his mounting terror provokes him to thrust a piece of wood against the trigger. He dies, but from heart failure, not a bullet – the rifle had discharged when the building collapsed. Later, the Union army, having received independent intelligence of the Confederate retreat, advances past the collapsed

building. Only Lieutenant Adrian Searing notices the body, but he does not recognise his brother, mistaking him for a Confederate soldier because he is covered in grey dust. The Lieutenant concludes from the gaunt, rigid features of the dead man that he has been dead for a week. In fact, just twenty-two minutes have passed since the collapse of the building.

It is worth distinguishing the different ways in which contingency is manifest in this story. There are, first of all, ordinary contingencies of the sort that every narrative is bound to include – incidental contingencies, unremarked and assumed as mere circumstance. There is neither a compelling reason why such circumstances should be so, nor any obvious objection to them being so. It is circumstantial that Searing's route through the woods should lead him to some derelict farm buildings, for example; it is circumstantial that the Union troops gain intelligence of the Confederate retreat independently of, and simultaneously with, Searing's reconnaissance mission. Both of these circumstances are essential to the story, but the story makes nothing of them. Such contingency is peripheral and taken for granted, and so does not disrupt the logic of narrative; it is only when contingency is foregrounded that narrative intelligibility is obstructed by the manifestation of chance. This foregrounding is, in general terms, an effect produced by two kinds of anomaly: one has to do with the violation of representational criteria of plausibility, the other to do with the discursive imposition of arbitrary narrative form. These two narrative features are not independent of each other.

The most flagrant chance event in "One of the Missing" is the way the farm building's collapse produces a situation in which Searing is alive but immobilised beneath the rubble, while the rifle he has just cocked has fallen in such a way that it is now aimed at his head, and he is unable to move, or to move the rifle, in any way except to ram a length of timber against its trigger. The story works hard to mitigate the improbability of this circumstance in several ways: it emphasises the "confusion of timbers" in the "crazy edifice" even before the artillery shell strikes it (78); it goes into detail about the configuration of beams, boards and debris that results (80-81); it naturalises Searing's position with respect to the rifle, which presents to his vision little more than the ring of metal that is its muzzle, by noting that he is "somewhat familiar with the aspect of rifles from that point of view" (82-3); and it offers as a precedent Searing's memory of unwittingly advancing in the face of a heavy cannon, only at the last moment realising the significance of the brass ring in front of him (83). It also

provides a narrative precedent for Searing's belief both that a slight disturbance might discharge the rifle, because of its hair trigger, and that the violent collapse of the building has nonetheless not done so. This memory, of an occasion when he used his own loaded and cocked rifle to club a man to death (84), merely duplicates and highlights the improbability inherent in the current situation as he understands it (though in this case he is mistaken, as it turns out); the improbable nature of the situation is not effaced. Nonetheless, the anecdote (like Bierce's other devices) assimilates it to criteria of plausibility through a kind of narrative thickening.

There is a curious double movement to the narrative strategy Bierce employs. The result of the building's collapse is an eventuality, in the sense of a particular narrative outcome, that is essential to the story, and as such it is simply a premise, impervious to the reader's scepticism. Yet it is also highly improbable, and in this respect it foregrounds the connection between "eventuality" and contingency (as when, for example, we brace ourselves against the occurrence of "unforeseen eventualities"). Every device that Bierce exploits to incorporate this eventuality within norms of narrative credibility does so by confronting, and so foregrounding, its extraordinary contingency. Even as the devices serve their purpose of consolidating the narrative intelligibility of the represented event, they draw attention to the way improbable contingencies are inherently resistant to narrative explanation.

An eventuality may be most broadly defined as a change of state, and in that sense it is the outcome of an event (etymologically, "event" itself means "outcome"; here we have in miniature the infinite regress at the root of narrative logic). The form of an event, as distinct from the perpetual seething flux of change in itself, is specifically narrative. That is to say, narrative at the most basic level is the mode of cognition to which we primarily resort in order to make sense of change – to find form in it, and so gain a conceptual grasp upon it. The basic form that narrative privileges is sequential: one thing leads to another. It is a rough-and-ready mode of sense making, a cognitively efficient heuristic that evidently proved adaptive for an intelligent social animal, and was amenable to further consolidation and elaboration through nurture and, more generally, culture. Intrinsic to narrative cognition's formal, social and anthropocentric premises, however, are a number of presuppositions that it imposes upon phenomena in more or less tendentious ways. Narrative form

inherently implies assumptions of agency, intentionality, perspectivalism, evaluative relevance, and teleology, among others.⁴ Narrative cognition is also pragmatic, in that its adaptive efficacy depends only upon achieving a “good enough” balance between coping with experience and the cognitive effort required to do so. Accordingly, narrative cognition has horizons, beyond which we lapse from the domain of achieved meaning back into brute experience, the knowledge by acquaintance of an immediate embodied relation to our environment. For this reason, while the event is a formal achievement of narrative comprehension, its internal logic remains unexamined in practice, and ultimately enigmatic in principle. –Where the eventuality is unremarkable, it is acceptably unexamined for ordinary purposes, and even where it is unaccountably improbable, further narrative elaboration might reduce the immediate enigma to acceptably unexamined commonplaces. But decomposing the event into sub-events does not lead us to solid ground, and not only because the sequential enigma may reappear within those sub-events themselves. In fact, if we push too far in this direction, the connective logic of narrative becomes more and more inevitably enigmatic, ever more remote from the familiar territory of the taken for granted. Narrative may offer expedient sense in the form of the event, but when pressed beyond its heuristic function it always raises more questions than it answers.

It is inherent in eventuality, then, that it presents both an intelligible, narrative face and an unaccountable face that eludes narrative sense. Bierce’s most extravagant expression of this double logic does not focus upon the highly improbable situation in which Searing finds himself, but upon the precursor to that situation, the circumstantial fact that a shell demolishes the building in which he is hidden. To account for this event Bierce goes on an elaborate digression, involving the birth of a child near the Carpathian Mountains, his growth into a military career, his disgrace and exile, his arrival in New Orleans (rather than New York) and consequent enlistment to the Confederate cause, and hence his presence as an artillery captain at Kennesaw Mountain. This highly condensed biography only converges with the main narrative at the point when this same captain, “having nothing better to do while awaiting his turn to pull out and be off, amused himself by sighting a field-piece obliquely to his right at what he mistook for some Federal officers on the crest of a hill, and discharged it” (77). The point of the digression is to highlight the vast web of circumstance involved

in such an eventuality; to insist upon the extent to which the event itself is dwarfed by the magnitude of the systemic context constituting the set of conditions for this outcome, “the concurrence of an infinite number of favoring influences and their preponderance over an infinite number of opposing ones” (76). Bierce gestures towards multiple dimensions of this systemic complexity, yet he can only express its totality by resorting again to narrative, albeit in an archly ironic way. This inconceivable complex of contingencies, he suggests, has been overseen “from the beginning of time” by “the Power charged with the execution of the work according to the design” (76). Bierce attempts to convey the intricately systemic nature of the relations between circumstances bearing upon this eventuality, yet does so by framing it within a narrative conceit that subordinates the whole to the agency of an omniscient intelligence, for whom the “desired result” – this eventuality – is a final cause teleologically determining the orchestration of everything that comes before.

“Had anything in all this vast concatenation been overlooked Private Searing might have fired on the retreating Confederates that morning” (77). This counterfactual statement, in which a slight change anywhere in the preceding context may have radically changed the outcome, anticipates the form of the most famous illustration of the non-linearity of complex systems, Edward Lorenz’s “butterfly effect”; that is, the idea that a tiny variable, such as whether or not a butterfly flaps its wings, can make the difference between two significantly divergent trajectories in the behaviour of a huge meteorological system. But Bierce’s narrative conceit of a guiding agency also anticipates the way in which Lorenz’s example, and our cognitive dependence upon narrative, encourage misunderstanding. The butterfly effect illustrates sensitive dependence upon initial conditions – the potentially radical difference between the weather system with the butterfly and the weather system without the butterfly. It is our narrative bias that translates this systemic idea into the notion that the butterfly “causes” the hurricane (or whatever outcome is hypothesised); as if it were possible, even in principle, to trace a series of consequences leading from the butterfly’s act to a later state of the entire system. A system’s behaviour is systemic, not sequential; the significance of the butterfly does not lie in its positive agency but in the variation it represents between two sets of systemic relations, a vanishingly small difference between two states of the meteorological totality.

There is another reason, however, for Bierce's assimilation of systemic contingency to a narrative model involving agency, intentionality, (omniscient) perspective, and teleology, and this has to do with the circumstance that he is writing fiction. His concern is not really to *explain* the eventuality on which his story centres, because his point is not that this is something that really happened. As a fiction, the story is much more concerned with the negotiation of values in narrative than with any directly informative purpose. It is important, certainly, that Bierce's Civil War stories are grounded in personal experience. Almost uniquely among significant figures in American literature, Bierce saw action himself in the war (including the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain), and sustained a serious head wound from a sniper's bullet.⁵ These facts bear upon "One of the Missing" directly, in its concern for historical accuracy and realistic detail, but also obliquely, in the way they inform its rhetorical negotiation of values. Critical commentary upon the story has tended to see it as strongly moralistic in tone, even if there is room for disagreement about the exact nature of its moral import.⁶ Such views seem to be supported by the ostentatiously cosmic determinacy to which Bierce subordinates the contingencies of his narrative. Whether the guiding power is understood as a deity or as Fate, its intentionality is explicitly guided by formal values, by a transcendent ethics mediated as aesthetics: what has been "decreed" is for the sake of "the harmony of the pattern," a "design" that must not be "marred" (76). "Nothing had been neglected—at every step in the progress of both these men's lives, and in the lives of their contemporaries and ancestors, and in the lives of the contemporaries of their ancestors, the right thing had been done to bring about the desired result" (77). Another term we might invoke to characterise the necessity of the desired result, this specific eventuality, might be "poetic justice." Searing, whose virtues as a soldier are strongly highlighted at the beginning of the story, proves at exactly this point to be morally base. He neglects his clear duty to return immediately to his commanding officers and report the vital information he has just discovered, in favour of the "singularly tempting" opportunity to send a bullet from his sniper rifle arbitrarily into the column of retiring Confederate troops (75). Bierce uses the word "murder" to characterise Searing's intended act, a moral judgement all the more forceful in a context of warfare that would generally render the concept moot (76). On this view, there is a clear logic to the intervention of Fate at this point, grounded not in narrative representation but in fictive rhetoric.

Such moralistic readings of the story credit it with an ethical assurance it does not really possess, however, and that it does not assert. It certainly transpires that the story's opening paragraphs present a hollow image of Searing as a heroic figure, but if he proves no better than other men, Bierce does not suggest he is worse. So, Searing's motive for repeatedly refusing promotion is not noble (he evidently enjoys being a sniper), but neither is there inherent nobility in accepting promotion. His brother, the lieutenant, is a contrasting figure in several respects, but the contrast offers no clear moral alignment. Lieutenant Searing is "mechanically" (91) preoccupied with his pocket watch (more on this later) and complacent in drawing faulty inferences: "'Dead a week,' said the officer curtly, moving on and absently pulling out his watch as if to verify his estimate of time" (92). He also fails to draw other important inferences, such as connecting the collapsed building with the "clatter of a falling building" he had heard shortly before (91); and he displays no curiosity about the fate of his brother, who had so recently set out into these woods from the part of the Union line under his command. Similarly, the story seems to set up the Confederate artillery captain as a candidate for moral contrast with Searing, yet it tells us explicitly that this captain fled his native country in military disgrace, that his motive for firing his field-piece was boredom, that he wrongly identified his target, and that he missed.⁷ Searing's intention to fire upon the retreating Confederates is pre-empted when he is himself inadvertently fired upon, and the reversal looks like poetic justice; but Bierce emphasises its contingency, and indeed the counterfactual contingency of what might otherwise have occurred, noting that Searing himself "would perhaps have missed" (77). If anything, the irony is at the expense of the conceit of providential oversight he has just elaborated. The scope of Bierce's irony expands, and it remains unclear what positive moral ground, if any, anchors it. He observes, at the moment Searing cocks his rifle, that "it is the business of a soldier to kill. It is also his habit if he is a good soldier" (76). There is certainly irony lurking here, and we would be entitled to read it as focalisation of Searing's own attitude; but Bierce also observes, with much less sense of internal focalisation, that to face firearms "with malevolent eyes blazing behind them ... is what a soldier is for" (83). The two statements are complementary, and the irony seems less to do with Searing than with Bierce's own ambivalence about war.

Bierce's anti-heroic view of warfare is well established in the criticism, but it is clearly not an affirmation of countervailing values of pacifism or peaceful society. His ironic view of war did not afford him a foundation in positive values beyond it, and he remained caught up in an unresolved relation to "the martial spirit" right up to his presumed death in Mexico in 1914.⁸ The untethered quality of Bierce's irony is manifest in passages like the following:

... in a moment of mental abstraction he had clubbed his rifle and beaten out another gentleman's brains, observing afterward that the weapon which he had been diligently swinging by the muzzle was loaded, capped, and at full cock – knowledge of which circumstance would doubtless have cheered his antagonist to longer endurance. (84)

This sentence is framed as Searing's recollection, but its style and register recognisably belong to Bierce. It is remote from Searing's idiom, and the thrust of its irony, especially in the last clause, is irrelevant to his concerns, which centre upon the rifle's sensitive trigger and his own lucky escape. The chilling humour of that last authorial aside encapsulates the nihilistic quality of Bierce's irony; it does not ironise certain values, so much as the possibility of value itself.

If Bierce regards his material with an exceptionally cold eye, however, he also engages in a sustained imaginative engagement with Searing's subjective experience. The title of the story, in fact, directs our attention here. "One of the Missing" does not foreground a moral examination of its protagonist, but rather the fact that his fate remains obscure to the world. The circumstances of Searing's death remain unknown to any but himself, as in the case of many casualties of the Civil War (as, ultimately, in the case of Bierce's own death). More generally, the subjective experience of death always remains untold, except in fiction; dying could be the master trope for the enigma of eventuality. Imagining the manner of a fictional character's death can hardly amount to a gain in understanding of the particular case, of course – and empathy, especially in Bierce's oeuvre, seems the wrong concept. However, fiction does offer its particularity as the vehicle for a displaced imaginative reflection upon whatever general (typical, moral, ideological, conceptual, theoretical, metaphysical) significance it may be taken to connote. Which is to say, in standard critical language,

fiction directs us to a thematic level of interpretation; or better, it achieves its significance by attending reflexively to its own narrative particulars, so that their status as facts is superseded by their instantiation of values.

The exploration of values is intrinsic to the literary use of narrative. Of course, *any* use of narrative entails evaluative commitments; but the formal and thematic defamiliarisation of such unreflective commitments is at the core of literary fiction's cultural role. Questions of value are also central, more specifically, to Bierce's narrative negotiations with chance and complexity. Chance, within a narrative paradigm, is the negation of meaning; it is the arbitrary, the random, the causeless, and so the failure of narrative sense. When it appears unreflectively in fiction it is typically a flaw; it is the unwarranted *deus ex machina* that resolves plot difficulties without satisfying narrative logic. For the same reason, though, its self-conscious use is one of the ways fiction tests and challenges the limits of narrative sense-making. Doing so is integral to fiction's cultural efforts to refine or extend the capacity of narrative, but such efforts always risk the breakdown of meaning – a mere lapse from narrative coherence, and from the articulation of value it affords. Literary fiction, then, involves a double movement of narrative disruption and recuperation; and in this it is, in one sense, well served by an appeal to systemic complexity. A narrative representation of egregiously contingent events can be recuperated by shifting to a systemic perspective, in which those events are situated as effects of a whole network of interactions too reciprocal, simultaneous and recursive to be traced in a narrative line. In this light, apparent randomness (in narrative form) is re-imagined and recuperated as determinate within a systemic model. However, the recuperation of apparent chance as complexity proves to be an equally intractable narrative problem in itself. While the form of a narrative's events may be motivated as the emergent effect of systemic processes, those systemic processes themselves elude narrative intelligibility. Unless, of course, they are subordinated to the hypothetical perspective of some narrative agent capable of comprehending and directing the whole, which is just what Bierce does, with a derisively ironic recognition that the whole exercise has secured him nothing. In literary terms we may wish to say that an interrogation of values, however negative its findings, has value in itself; but this is not the communicative thrust of Bierce's story. Far from being a moral tale, it is an

expression of nihilism; or – to be more circumspect – of the failure of narrative understanding to establish foundational values that will stand against his own excoriating satirical eye.

Bierce's narrative interrogation of the consolations of narrative occurs both at the communicative level of the authorial discourse and, figuratively, through the represented perspective of Searing himself; this is one of many formal doublings and parallelisms that structure the story. As such, it also exemplifies the reflexive movement by which fiction always turns its attention upon itself, and which becomes the first principle of complexification in literary fictions. This move is epitomised in the central situation of the story, the motif of the gun turned against its owner. That device is itself foreshadowed early on, as Searing disappears into the woods: "'That is the last of him,' said one of the men; 'I wish I had his rifle; those fellows will hurt some of us with it'" (73). And of course the motif is also, in a larger sense, a figure for civil war itself. The strong metaphorical import of Searing's situation after the collapse of the building raises the question of whether we should take it literally at all. At first sight, it could plausibly be read as a variation upon the device of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," in which the protagonist's intrepid escape from hanging and return home, elaborated over more than half the story, proves ultimately to occur only in his imagination at the point of death (27-45). However, we have to refuse the temptation to conclude, by analogy, that Searing died in the collapse of the building – which is the cause of death his brother infers when he comes across the unrecognised corpse. Other physical evidence contributing to Lieutenant Searing's deduction actually contradicts it. He sees the effects of rigor mortis, and a week of dew, in Searing's distorted features and damp hair; we are obliged to read them as the signs of his psychological trauma.

Searing endured that trauma, Bierce tells us, for less than twenty-two minutes. The disparity between this fact and Searing's own experience of it foregrounds Bierce's concern with temporal disorientation as a symptom of trauma, and is the real basis for comparison between his two stories. It is reasonable to speculate that Bierce's imaginative engagement with trauma was informed by first-hand experience; but this preoccupation with deformed temporality also links it specifically to his problems with narrative. The problematic relation between traumatic experience and narrative has been a staple of trauma studies since Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996); for Bierce, the problem is simply that we need to make narrative sense of experience, but trauma is symptomatically

intractable to narrative. Psychological trauma, in his stories, is the prime manifestation of narrative's inadequacy to experience, and hence his disbelief in the possibility of value secured through narrative form. Whether or not the origins of this view lie in his own war trauma, the relation he posits between trauma and narrative is reciprocal: psychological trauma becomes both cause and effect of narrative dislocation.

There are multiple ways in which "One of the Missing" uses patterns of repetition to give form to its material, but they tend to be strongly marked by dissonance, both for the reader and for Searing himself. His smile is twice mentioned, for example, and in both cases it arises from black humour: in the first instance, "He smiled at his own method of estimating distance" – that is, his conclusion that he cannot have come far because he is still alive (73); in the second, we are told that he had always smiled to recall the occasion when he nearly killed himself by clubbing a man to death with his cocked rifle, but also that "now he did not smile" (84). His callous sense of humour is just one aspect of the mental resilience that the collapse of the building strips away from him. Again, when he first regains consciousness he thinks that he has died and been buried, and that his wife, accompanied by his children, is kneeling upon his grave; this hallucination follows immediately after his own intention, in targeting the retreating Confederates moments before, of "making a widow or an orphan..." (78). It is also the first of two mentions of his own family, the solace of which is stripped away in both cases. Here, he thinks his wife's weight upon the grave is crushing him; a little later, he momentarily reflects that although he cannot move he is at least facing north, towards his wife and children, only to immediately exclaim, "Bah! ... what have they to do with it?" (85). These and other repetitions and parallels give form to the narrative; at the same time, as foregrounded reflexive moments in the narrative, they defamiliarise and ironise that form.

The struggle to impose form, to establish meaning, is fundamental to the psychological impact of the traumatic situation in which Searing finds himself. His first disoriented efforts to integrate his current state with his prior experience are full of contradiction and incoherence; or else emphasise the gulf between present and past, as above. His thought process is typically digressive, in flight from the unassimilable event; but the reverse, a movement from irrelevance to relevance, also occurs. So, he wanders deliriously into "pleasant memories of his childhood" and an adventure to the

terrifying “Dead Man’s Cave,” only to notice a metal ring around its entrance and be brought abruptly back to the present (85-6). Here, the immediate phenomenon (the barrel of the gun), instead of prompting a centrifugal movement of association, functions as the terminus of his thought, drawing him back from escapism in a distressing re-convergence of memory with his present plight. That is to say, Searing’s trauma is compounded by the fact that making sense of it just confirms the imminent prospect of the only narrative closure left available to him, which is death.

Perhaps the most disturbing manifestation of this logic in the story occurs when Searing, “caught like a rat in a trap” himself (79), is visited by some actual rats. Fearful that they may trigger the rifle, he shoos them away; but there follows, in a paragraph of its own, this sentence:

The creatures went away; they would return later, attack his face, gnaw away his nose, cut his throat – he knew that, but he hoped by that time to be dead. (87)

It is disturbing on several levels, the horrific image it presents being only the most obvious. Beyond that, there is the revelation that Searing, who at this point in the story is still ostensibly struggling to find a way out of his situation, expects to die and indeed hopes it will be before the rats return. But beyond that, too, is the temporal dislocation of the brutal narrative prolepsis lurking in “they would return later.” Because the sentence’s focalisation upon Searing’s perspective is in retrospective narration, the future tense is backshifted. From the authorial perspective, the rats’ return is narrated as having occurred, even though when the story ends they have not yet done so. What Searing knows, then, is that this eventuality is as certain as if it had already happened. The last related event of the story, in which his brother fails to recognise his corpse, confirms for us that it is indeed certain.

The deathward momentum of narrative necessity in Bierce’s story seems to argue that the achieved meaning narrative affords is somehow aligned with the collapse of the conscious domain of human value back into physical matter, the body reduced to carrion for rats. Indeed, this is no more than a particularly bleak version of the equation between narrative closure and death adumbrated by, for example, Frank Kermode and Peter Brooks.⁹ Every narrative outcome, every formal closure it achieves, is a figurative kind of death, suggesting that the best prospects for affirmation of life must

lie in the other concept of eventuality, the provisional and plural vistas of contingency. The impetus behind the literary complexification of narrative is in this direction, opposing narrative's teleological drive towards resolution by elaborating the scope of connotation within the system of meaning itself; postponing the finality of an outcome in favour of the receding horizon of the implicit in semiosis. To the extent that it manifests as a system of connotation, literary narrative necessarily exceeds any bounded sense of communicative intentionality; the authorial act of communication is less instrumental than gestural, not delivering a message but indicating interpretative prospects that ramify without a determinate limit. The literary use of narrative provides for continual renegotiation of the balance between cognitive effort and interpretative reward that drives narrative sensemaking. In this particular case, Bierce delineates the outlines of his intent to represent a physical fate (Searing's) as the epitome of a metaphysical one (his own and, he thinks, ours); but where, and how far, that gesture directs us is an open question, and depends upon our own pursuit of the centrifugal trajectories of association and inference.

Literary narrative confronts narrative's sequential logic with its inadequacy to the systemic complexity of life, and attempts to address that inadequacy by complexifying narrative itself. This move deploys both the reflexive capacity of semiosis and its unbounded openness to the implicit. It foregrounds the tension between the intentionality of narrative communication and the complexity of semiotic systems, in order to establish a parallel with the tension between narrative representation and the systemic complexity of the empirical world. Through such an equivalence literary narrative internalises the latter problem and becomes, to that extent, more responsive to it. In doing so, it also develops a means of negotiating between necessity and chance, by evoking an interpretative and representational hinterland, systemic in nature, that accommodates the (narratively) arbitrary and random without conceding to an absolute indeterminacy. Indeed, the term "Chaos Theory" (coined by mathematician James Yorke) picks out just this feature of the behaviour of complex dynamic systems – their deterministic production of unpredictable, *apparently* chaotic behaviour.

There is small comfort for narrative understanding, however, in the idea that systemic behaviour is only apparently chaotic. Bierce describes the chaotic fallen timbers of the demolished building as an "intricate, patternless system" (79), and in doing so identifies a crucial gap between the

concepts of system and pattern. To identify phenomena as systemic does not in itself secure a cognitive grasp upon them; it does not amount to making sense, because sense – intelligible form, or pattern – does not inhere in the object itself (the system), but in the subject-object relation. Pattern, to be pattern at all, needs both to be *there*, and to be discerned; it is an interpretative perspective upon phenomena. Pattern, in other words, occupies the indefinite realm of the implicit; that which is available to cognition, yet only realised by it. To articulate such a realisation, cognitively or discursively, is to cash in the significance it affords – but also recursively to make available further patterning, implicit within the narrative's own system of meaning, and so to displace and extend the implicit rather than exhaust it.

Our interpretative engagement with our environment requires agency and perspective, and the events of the story undermine Searing's capacity for both. The trauma of his experience radically disorients his sense of perspective – evaluative and spatiotemporal – in ways that emphasise the interdependence of his mental and physical capacities, tying his cognitive agency to his embodied interaction with the world. Searing's conspicuous prowess, as first presented, is indeed both physical and mental; but as one critic observes of his decline from supremely able scout to half-buried unrecognised corpse, "A more pointed image of the disappearance of act and agent into scene would be hard to find" (Elmer 456). The story explicitly strips away his degrees of freedom, and in doing so figures narrative necessity as physical constraint. Bierce specifies in detail the movements denied to Searing by the tangle of fallen timbers, until the only action left for him to take is to thrust a length of wood against his rifle's trigger. In doing so he is resigning his life, and indeed he does die, but from psychological rather than physical causes. Given Searing's mistaken but plausibly motivated belief that the rifle is still loaded, it makes no practical difference whether or not it has in fact already discharged; the psychological effect of his fear converges with the physical effect of the expected bullet so that, regardless of the actual state of affairs, his need for narrative resolution equates with his death. The revelation that the rifle is harmless, then, is for the reader alone; it allows for a darkly ironic remove from Searing's perspective, but only at the moment of its necessary extinction. By withholding this information, Bierce compels our full imaginative engagement with Searing's experience, disallowing the detached scrutiny of a suppositious omniscience. By revealing it at this

point, he abruptly and cynically redirects our attention to the gap between Searing's subjective torment and his actual circumstances, just when the chance of an alternative outcome disappears.

I have so far dwelt upon the perspectival implications of narrative in evaluative terms, but Bierce's story very pointedly treats narrative perspective as first of all a literal question of the subjective relation to environment; to situation and movement in space and time. The motif of estimating distance and time recurs at several points in the story, and it is the nub of its ending. The final paragraph just gives us Lieutenant Searing's conclusion that the body he sees in the collapsed building has been dead a week, and tells us that he then moves on, "absently pulling out his watch as if to verify his estimate of time. Six o'clock and forty minutes" (92). The passage achieves several things simultaneously. The irrelevance of his watch's clock time to the judgement he has just made, on the basis of the temporality of physical evidence, is an ironic commentary upon the mismatch between his estimate and the reality of the case. The time given also refers us back to the previous occasion on which he consulted his watch, twenty-two minutes earlier when he heard the fall of the building, and so both confirms that his estimate is wildly wrong, and tells us how distorted Searing's own subjective experience of the passage of time has been since then, due to both his initial delirium and the state of terror in which he ultimately dies. Bierce defamiliarises temporality in his description of this final extreme state, both topically and through an abrupt shift to the present tense: "Here is immortality in time—each pain an everlasting life. The throbs tick off eternities" (88). The final contrast between Lieutenant Searing's estimate and the objective facts also serves a function beyond its foregrounding of distorted temporality, however; it resolves the story on the theme of spatiotemporal perspective that has run through it. Searing himself, in his trap, grapples with multiple problems of perspective exacerbated by trauma and immobility. His sense of distance, in particular, is emphasised: the ruins of the building around him at first seem at a remote distance, "so great that it fatigued him" (79); once he has recognised the muzzle of his rifle, it subsequently seems to have moved "somewhat nearer" (84), then "an inconceivable distance away, and all the more sinister for that" (86). But his brother's final act of estimation most directly echoes a phrase from earlier in the story: Searing's own ironic "method of estimating distance," based upon the fact that he is still alive. This mock estimation is itself inextricable from his agency and temporal perspective – "It seems a

long time,' he thought, 'but I cannot have come very far'" (73) – and it also alludes to the essential skill, for a scout, of actually estimating distance.

The story says nothing explicit about this. Yet the question of the method of such estimation does correlate with another detail, which is that Searing's rifle, we are told, is a Springfield, "but fitted with a globe sight and hair-trigger" (75). The reason for mentioning the hair trigger is clear enough – it is essential to the plot – but what we should make of the globe sight is less clear. Bierce's detail is accurate, as a history of Union army sharpshooters confirms (quoting an article in the *New York Times* from the seventh of August 1861): "They will be armed with the most Improved Springfield rifle, with a plain silver pin sight at the muzzle, and ... the globe sight at the breech" (Earley 11). Beyond verisimilitude, though, the detail highlights the perspectival issue of sighting. Searing is on the point of using this sight when the artillery shell strikes and prevents him from doing so; its primary significance proves to be irrelevant (as, in a different sense, does that of the hair trigger). But sighting and estimating distance are intimately related, through the standard method of parallax. Sighting a distant object with the rifle, then closing the sighting eye and using the other, will cause the muzzle pin to appear displaced sideways against the field. The lateral distance of the displacement at the target can be assessed relative to the scale of recognisable landmarks such as buildings or trees; the distance to the target will then be approximately ten times greater. This parallax method works by triangulation: the distance to the target is about ten times the lateral displacement, because the length of the rifle barrel is about ten times the distance between your eyes.¹⁰ It is also, evidently, a form of estimation grounded in embodied cognition, depending specifically upon the binocular nature of our visual perception of our environment.

Bierce does not represent Searing making such an estimate of distance, nor does he refer to the method by which a scout would do so. This reading delves a long way into the excess of connotation implicit in the semiotic system of the story, and may seem arbitrary; it is not plausibly part of Bierce's deliberate communicative intention. But that intention does include a prompt to engage in this way with the domain of connotation beyond the closed form of his narrative. Bierce's intention is best understood as a comprehensive gesture of negation, the authorial rhetoric of which doubles his protagonist's psychological struggle: Searing's inescapable fall from omniscient

agent to corpse is shadowed by Bierce's own implacable reduction of narrative meaning to its deathward drive. This bleak demonstration of narrative's inability to secure a solid foundation of meaning or values, pursued through narrative's own reflexive and implicit potentialities, nonetheless would seem to achieve literary value in the irony of its very negation, as we shall see. But it is also more than communicative; it becomes a performative gesture that strips narrative down to its bare logic, shedding implicit meanings along the way, and so does more than it says.

An answering gesture of interpretation, then, should attend to the complex network of connotations beyond the linear narrative form of the story, the coherence of which is repudiated by its own reflexive turns. This is not an invitation to interpretative chaos, however; to discern an implicit motif, such as the idea of parallax as an exemplar of situated embodied cognition, is to claim that such a pattern of meaning is in some sense there. And the pattern is indeed there. The story foregrounds several moments of situated cognition in which the signs of the environment are read. Lieutenant Searing's final reading of the scene of Searing's death is one of these, and notable for being utterly wrong; but Searing himself repeatedly makes inferences from his environment, and much more successfully. Early in the story he relaxes his stealthy approach through the woods when, having "rightly interpreted the signs, whatever they were" (74), he concludes that the enemy positions ahead have been abandoned. In the immediate aftermath of the building's collapse he deduces that his period of unconsciousness had lasted only a few seconds, from the dust that was still settling around him (80-81). He determines from the shadows he can see in his trapped position that he is facing north (85). Most pointedly, though, when he notices the muzzle of his rifle in front of him, he establishes where it is pointing by means, precisely, of parallax:

By closing either eye he could look a little way along the barrel – to the point where it was hidden by the rubbish that held it. He could see the one side, with the corresponding eye, at apparently the same angle as the other side with the other eye. Looking with the right eye, the weapon seemed to be directed at a point to the left of his head, and vice-versa. He was unable to see the upper surface of the barrel, but could see the under surface of the stock at a slight angle. The piece was, in fact, aimed at the exact centre of his forehead. (82)

This passage both epitomises Searing's cognitive competence and establishes the narrative eventuality that will determine the inexorable course of the rest of the story. Searing's physical agency having already been almost entirely stripped away, from this point the breadth of his cognitive perspective also progressively narrows as his fear intensifies, until the point where "Nothing could now unfix his gaze from the little ring of metal with its black interior" (87-8). Bierce's story insists upon the pitiless drive of narrative necessity towards death, and exhibits scorn for the comforts of narrative in the face of trauma; yet this outcome is precipitated by an eventuality of a quite different kind, an ostentatious irruption of unassimilable chance into the narrative order. For Bierce himself, such contingency is only intelligible within the frame of a cosmic narrative order he can neither really conceptualise nor believe; and a non-narrative order of eventuality is no order at all. For him, the orientation of narrative form towards its end can offer no achieved meaning beyond the corporeal fact of a soldier's tormented corpse, unrecognisable even to his nearest relation. But he demands too much of narrative, and affirms too little in consequence; and the literary value of irony itself helps to explain why. It is a reflexive meta-value, here deriving from Bierce's implied critique of narrative rather than being a direct achievement of narrative. Irony achieves form under a sign of negation, and in doing so necessarily establishes a displaced positive value of some kind. The relation between achieved form and ironic negation is cyclical, however; everything irony gives it can also take away. While readers may prefer to dwell in the phase of this cycle when achieved value comes to the fore, Bierce himself is not inclined to do so. For him, the only final ground of meaning is death, and it is final order that he demands. Yet the corporeal fact of cognitive embodiment does not equate with death, but with the open borders of sense, the domain of the implicit that mediates between narrative knowledge and our experiential continuity with the systemic environment to which we belong, in life and *in medias res*. Reading Bierce's story against the grain, we can attend to the qualities of narrative sensemaking in process rather than the chimera of achieved meaning; which is to situate narrative logic, and its capacity for the provisional articulation of value, with respect to its premises in embodied cognition rather than its inevitable conclusion.

Endnotes

1. Perhaps the most useful precedent for my approach here is provided by the notion of a “tutor text” [texte tuteur], as invoked by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (e.g., 14-15).
2. I owe thanks to John Pier for drawing my attention to this story, in the context of a collaborative project on complexity and chance for the ALEA research network and the prospective two-volume edited collection, *Figures of Chance: The Imagination of Contingency in the West (16th to 21st Centuries)*.
3. Both “One of the Missing” and “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” are collected in volume one of *In the Midst of Life* (the collection of stories originally published under the title of *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* in 1891). All subsequent references are to the text of this volume, as published in 1909.
4. The implications of this view of narrative as fundamentally a mode of cognition are elaborated in Walsh, “Narrative Theory for Complexity Scientists.”
5. The only other notable author to write about his experiences as a Civil War soldier was Sidney Lanier.
6. See Donald Blume’s extended discussion (83-98).
7. Blume attempts to establish both the Confederate captain and Searing’s brother as points of moral contrast in the story (85-7).
8. Bierce’s ambivalence about war, and his inability to affirm positive values beyond it, are the focus of Giorgio Mariani’s “Ambrose Bierce’s Civil War Stories and the Critique of the Martial Spirit.”
9. The formal conception of narrative resolution as death is a theme explored by Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* (1968) and by Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), especially in his chapter on Freud and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.
10. Explanations of parallax are easily found online. One thorough account, which covers both the application discussed here and estimating the distance of stars in astronomy, is at <http://www.phy6.org/stargaze/Sparallax.htm>.

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